

# Taking a Pass on Salt

Universally maligned on health grounds, but organoleptically adored, salt presents challenges for creating palatable, but healthy, flavor profiles

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When it comes to seasoning foods with a particular ingredient in the restaurant and retail sectors, salt is an obvious choice. Salt's widespread likeability in taste profile, versatility and extensive availability at an inexpensive cost make this ubiquitous mineral the ultimate option for seasoning purposes. Despite salt's longtime use in cooking and as a table condiment, only recently has the additive come under ubiquitous scrutiny by governments, health organizations, consumer groups and the media for its adverse health effects when consumed in excess. In response to today's heightened concerns surrounding a high sodium intake, manufacturers and operators are promptly taking action to reduce their foods' salt levels.

In small amounts, sodium is essential for executing key processes that support proper functioning of the human body. However, when its consumption exceeds the daily recommended allowance, sodium is linked to hypertension—a major risk factor for the onset of heart disease and stroke. Recognizing that the average American consumes far too much sodium, this past June the 2010 Dietary Guideline Advisory Committee (DGAC) called for a significant sodium reduction of the previously recommended 2,300 mg/day to a more conservative 1,500 mg/day.

## Restaurants React

Because of their menus' generally larger portion sizes, many sit-down restaurants have become the culprit for offering dishes with too high of a sodium count. In response to media publications portraying several chains' entrées as some of the worst offenders with regard to high sodium levels, several foodservice operators have augmented their menus with a "good for you" section. On its Lighthouse menu, which features seafood entrées with less than 500 calories and 750 mg of sodium, Red Lobster is one casual diner that has proactively worked to inform consumers of its dishes' nutritional sodium contents. In addition to providing consumers with a list of healthful dishes from its *Guiltless Grill* menu, Chili's also displays the sodium content of its menu items online.

## Salt Substitutes and "Low in Sodium" Formulations

To preserve the shelf life of foods, many companies formulate their brands with substantial levels of salt and

other ingredients high in sodium. According to the Mayo Clinic, "Salt helps prevent spoiling by drawing moisture out of food, so bacteria can't grow. Salt kills bacteria that might cause spoiling." Now that manufacturers understand the health risks associated with a high salt intake, more of their products have been altered to not contain such life-prolonging agents. To stand on a low-in or free-from salt platform, most food items take one of two routes to satisfy sodium reduction claims—that is, with a salt substitute or by cutting ingredients known to up a product's total sodium count. In the United States, Heinz expanded its renowned tomato ketchup brand with a new varietal dubbed *No Salt Added* (formulated with *AlsoSalt*). *AlsoSalt* is a branded salt substitute that houses two primary natural ingredients, potassium and lysine. In Spain, Lancaster Plus' *Vaporized Liquid Salt* under the *Fossil* brand is not only highlighted for its reduced sodium chloride content but also for its liquid spray format, which interestingly serves to lessen salt consumption. The makers of *Fossil Liquid Salt* maintain that two to four pumps of the product equates to a 90% sodium reduction when compared to a pinch of standard table salt.

Sodium reduction is a reality for restaurants and manufacturers alike, with consumers becoming more educated on low-sodium foods and health agencies overtly urging businesses to lower their foods' higher sodium levels. To successfully cut the sodium content of their dishes without sacrificing a savory taste, restaurants will increasingly look to the manufacturing segment's latest low-in-salt ingredients as they appear in new product launches. The flavor profiles of food menu items and products can expect to take a more herbal, citrusy or spicy taste, as they steer clear of such sodium-laden ingredients while also aiming to please the taste buds of salt lovers.

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